

RESTORING THE FOCUS OF WORSHIP

Standing before you today, I have thought to ask myself the Admiral Stockdale question. You remember Admiral Stockdale? Ross Perot chose him as his running mate for his aborted presidential race in 1992. Finding himself in front of the cameras in the televised vice-presidential debate, Stockdale blurted out his famous quip, “What am I doing here?” More than a few times in the course of preparing this talk I have raised this question. What can I say that will inform and encourage an audience that has come together essentially to make sense of what we see is going on in the church today?

I suspect that my invitation may have something to do with several articles and talks I have given recently about the dangers of the Churches of Christ submerging themselves in the evangelical culture. I realize that this is a sensitive topic in some quarters. There are many in Churches of Christ who take delight in moving us into a subset of the broad fellowship of evangelical Christianity. Of course, opinions move across a wide spectrum. There are some (a distinct minority) who entertain the hope that we give up being an identifiable fellowship and sink into evangelicalism at large. There are others who desire that we relate to the evangelicals, but in the words of Ron Highfield, remain an “intellectually robust fellowship with our own doctrinal distinctives.” They have in mind such areas as our views on the nature of the church and baptism. No doubt, between these two poles many fall in between.

No one can tell where all this will end up, least of all academics. However, I have made myself a target, by staking out a clear position on this issue. To state my views succinctly, I have tried to make the case that as a fellowship we have had a very different history from the evangelicals. Tellingly, most of them have never heard of us; and to this day, they are not interested in us. We have kept our distance in part because of separate histories. I propose that this situation, although for different reasons, continue into the future. Let me fill this out a little bit more.

Relationships With The Evangelicals

With respect to the point about our different histories, I will be very brief. Evangelicalism may be defined as a conglomeration of para-church entities and ventures. These cross denominational lines but unite in a common vision. That vision is what is most important. At its heart it urges that we put our absolute trust in Jesus’ finished work of salvation on the cross; and continue to live in a personal relationship with him. Needless to say this places the emphasis on the autonomy of the individual. To the evangelical, everything in Christianity revolves around personal decisions and commitments. The church, as much as it plays a part at all, is definitely secondary. On the other hand, Churches of Christ have placed great emphasis on developing spiritual formation within the church, which nourishes us unto salvation. In our fellowship the two great ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are central and essential for spiritual formation and salvation. For evangelicals they are peripheral. All that is to be housed in faith in Christ’s work on the cross.

Most recently, many of our people, living in the vast expanse of American suburbia have discovered the evangelicals. It is hard not to notice them. Some of their assemblies attract vast

numbers of people. Many of them have a reputation for being very consumer-friendly by tailoring activities in these services to the fulfillment of felt needs. Celebrities give music performances and receive applause for their accomplishments. In general there is a close fit between the forms and structures of popular culture in America and in what takes place in many of their assemblies. Not only are our young people energized by this emphasis, many of our preachers admire and seek to imitate these connections. The goal is church growth. Instead of having a pool of slightly more than a million members it is more inviting for some of our preachers to fish in a great expanse of over forty million. Nevertheless, especially with respect to worship, I intend to make a case for us resisting the temptation to go down that road.

The Focus of Worship

What has all this to do with “restoring the focus of worship”? A lot. I hope we can agree that we, like some evangelicals, to be fair, are not interested in the more egregious expressions of praise that we see in some of their assemblies. The story of creation, sin, redemption, subduing our old natures through discipleship, demands a more serious reflective mode of worship than contemporary feel-good spirituality. We dare not trade away time-honored spiritual disciplines for this mess of pottage that many are serving up. Nevertheless, it is not my intention today to say that we sit back in our pews and simply preserve the status quo in our churches. We can and must do better in the conduct of our worship services. But the reason for doing this is not to turn the faith into Christianity-lite for the seeker. Rather it is to lead the people of God into a spiritually deeper and more intellectually challenging faith that will allow us to meet the multiple challenges we face after we leave the assembly. Today, I will focus on two areas that especially need attention: Our praise in song and the Lord’s Supper.

Our Praise in Song

I do not know what it is like at your local church, but I suspect that a good percentage of the songs that you sing in the assembly are of the praise and worship variety interspersed with some gospel songs. I will not comment further on the unconvincing rationale that if we are to keep the young people we must sing their music; except to say, I am not especially interested in whether in rhythm and structure the music is contemporary or traditional. What I am interested in is the lyrics. And here I will simply give some examples.

Consider this hymn of praise by John Austin, 1613-1639.

Behold, we come dear Lord to thee
and bow before thy throne
we come to offer on our knee
our praise to thee alone.

What’er we have, what’er we are
Thy bounty freely gave
Thou dost here in mercy spare
And wilt hereafter save

But above all, prepare thy heart
On this his own blest day
In its sweet task to bear thy part
And sing, and love and pray

I will spare you the banality of the lyrics of a contemporary praise song, but these lyrics will not stand up when we rest them alongside Austin's poem. Please note that I am not attempting to banish the praise song from the assembly. Some of them (sung once) could be usefully attached as a response to a hymn with words worthy of the praise of God. But the question I am raising, I believe, is important. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets regularly challenged the people to offer only their best to God. Why should we, as the assembly of the people of the living God on Sunday morning, settle for such trivial and second-rate lyrics that we find in so many contemporary songs of praise? I will tell you why! It is because of the huge industry of marketing this stuff in Christian radio and other outlets of the evangelical empire. When will elders and worship leaders say no to this drivel? Here is another example from Isaac Watts. We remember Watts for many great hymns including, of course, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"; but listen to his paraphrasing of Psalm 23.

My Shepherd will supply my need,
Jehovah is his name;
in pastures green he makes me feed
beside the living stream.

He brings my wandering spirit back
when I forsake his ways;
and leads me, for his mercy's sake,
in paths of truth and grace.

When I walk thro' the shades of death,
thy presence is my stay;
a word of thy supporting breath
drives all my fears away.

Thy hand, in sight of all my foes,
Doth still my table spread;
my cup with blessings overflows,
thine oil anoints my head.

The sure provisions of my God
attend me all my days;
O may thy house be mine abode,
and all my work be praise!

There would I find a settled rest,
(while others go and come)
no more a stranger or a guest,
but like a child at home.

Now, in case you are saying these are expressions of literate English society, at a certain point in time that could never happen again, consider the wording of the lengthiest hymns of the ancient church fragmentarily preserved in the New Testament. Colossians 1:15-20 is a hymn of two stanzas of praise for Christ and the church. Philippians 2:6-11 is a hymn of praise for the self-giving of God in the servanthood of Christ and his exaltation to the right hand of God. 1 Timothy 3:16, which is printed in most Bibles in poetic form, is a hymn that pursues similar themes. If the ancient church and seventeenth and eighteenth century English congregations (both with their share of marginalized and illiterate people) could praise God with such spiritual depth, surely we enlightened twenty-first century people can do as well. And, I stress this is not only a matter of aesthetics. Contrary to what some seem to be saying, the Christian faith is not all about celebration and assisting me to feel good spiritually. No, as I recently overheard a grieving mother say at her son's funeral, "This is not supposed to happen – parents are to outlive their children," Christian faith is about providing resources for that kind of grief. These are the kinds of people who walk into our assembly every Sunday morning. As well as giving us a language to express our joy and victories worship is about bringing us through the times of lament, dealing with failure to resist the wiles of the evil one; it is about bringing the word of the grace of forgiveness when we cannot forgive ourselves. And above all, it is not about introducing us to a popular or user-friendly God (indeed that God is not God at all), but the God of the Bible who often is interfering when unwanted, absent when wanted, but who in Jesus Christ we are encouraged to call as "Our Father." We need hymns and prayers regularly in worship that articulate that reality; otherwise we will become spiritual pygmies.

One other – a Wesley hymn to be sung before the labor of the day. It would be sung as we leave the assembly.

Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go
my daily labor to pursue
thee, only thee, resolved to know
in all I think, or speak, or do.

Preserve me from my calling's snare,
and hide my simple heart above
above the thorns of choking care,
the gilded baits of worldly love.

If we are to restore the focus of worship we must raise the expectations of the level of praise in our assemblies. We are told repeatedly that many of our people are numb with the superficialities and trivialities of daily existence. They seek a deeper spiritual dimension. We can find it with a proper choice of hymns. The great tragedy is that so often in many of our mainstream churches, Bible Study is uninspired and boring; the activities in the assembly appear

pedestrian. No wonder that some of our sensitive people look elsewhere. We must give the brethren more meat and challenge them to a deeper spirituality.

Here is a challenge. On the way to work simply turn off your car radio and commit to memory ten or twelve of the great hymns we sing in our assembly. At the University of Texas at Austin is a brilliant physicist – a Nobel Prize winner. Several years ago he was speaking to a group of us in a seminar at UT and got a little off his subject. His study of physics had led him to the conclusion that there was no point to life. But he couldn't live with this atheism, so at night, for months on end, he and his wife sat at home and memorized some of the great nineteenth century romantic poems in order to find some meaning to it all. Tragic. Pathetic. Yes! But I would say he was on to something as well. Indeed, I am convinced that our problem in worship is not always the banality of the service itself. It is the level of perception and spiritual depth that we bring into that room. We believe that answers to the hard questions can be found in the story of how the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ revealed himself to humankind. Then, before we seek to encounter the Lord in the assembly let us submit to the discipline of knowing that story as our story; and let us seriously reflect upon it regularly through the legacy of the great hymns bequeathed to us by the poets of the church.

Our Time at the Table

In the years I spent as an elder, without doubt, the two questions that I most frequently encountered were: (1) Why don't you require the men waiting on the table to wear a coat and tie? and, (2) Why do we have to sing when the bread and cup are passed around in the assembly?

Now, as one who is not sartorially impeccable, I will pass over the former question without comment. However, the second question does have possibilities. I think that some react strongly against a scripture reading or singing during the Lord's Supper because they have succumbed to the myth of personal autonomy. Ironically, as the evangelicals, as individuals, we often are in danger of thinking that true spirituality is found in a time of quiet personal reflection; and heaven help the worship leader if he disturbs this moment of reflection on the wonder of the sacrifice of Christ.

But let me take issue with that. I am in the process of writing a book for members of the church focusing on what we believe is taking place at the Table. In reading the scriptural accounts and observing the practices of the ancient church, I am once again impressed that the Table was far more than a place of quiet reflection on what it cost the Savior to bring forgiveness of sins. For the ancient church, the Lord's Supper was closely connected with the ethos of a meal. To be sure, as an anticipation of the final banquet with the Messiah, it was always tinged with the sobering truth that it cost the life of the Son of God and that a betrayer was at the Table. But you cannot get away from the fact that as all partake of the one loaf, it is the most visible expression of the unity of the body of Christ. That is why we do this together in the assembly rather than individually taking it in a private room. I have nothing against a silent prayer as we take the bread and the cup. I do it myself. But at the same time there is a clear horizontal dimension to all this. Without this understanding we will forfeit a vital part of the biblical witness. I believe we need to say much more on what is appropriate preparation for the Supper and how we express our unity together at the Table. Once again, we believe the Lord is active in

what takes place in the Supper. Let us prepare to come to the Table in light of that awesome reality.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In spite of many troublesome trends, I am optimistic about the future of the Lord's church. This basic optimism is not based on Barna or Gallup surveys but on the Lord's promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against his church. I am resting on the promise of the Lord.

In this talk I have attempted to make the point that importing the staples of evangelical worship into our assemblies will ultimately take us down the wrong trail. Instead I have suggested that we need to recover a sense of the grandeur of Christian worship found in the great hymns and a deeper appreciation of the treasure of the Lord's Supper – something, in our best moments, we have believed and practiced.

As I conclude, let me make one point. Frequently, worship in Churches of Christ is criticized for being too cerebral and lacking in emotion. Frankly, I am puzzled by this critique. Besides the fact that the great leaders of the church throughout history remind us that our emotions are not a trustworthy place to discover God, I do not know that anyone, for sure, is aware of what evokes true emotion in the assembly. A great hymn of praise that was sung at my mother's funeral; a silent prayer when a young person is being baptized – all of these can be as emotional as deathbed stories of those snatched away before they could obey the Gospel. Above all, let us not try to contrive emotion in the service.

Returning to Admiral Stockdale. Somewhere along in the debate someone asked him a question to which he didn't have an answer. I will always remember his response – "I am out of ammo on that one." I will freely admit that I do not have all the answers about what we need to do in our assemblies in the coming days; but I am certain that to say that the answer is to make them more up-beat, fast moving and culturally friendly is to go down the wrong road. I have tried to show that there is a little more than that to Christian Faith.

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